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Work–family balance of Indian women software professionals: A qualitative study

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Abstract One of the significant changes witnessed in the labour markets in India has been the entry of women IT professionals in the rapidly growing software services sector. As the women take on the role of working professional in addition to their traditional role of the homemaker, they are under great pressure to balance their work and personal lives. This study attempts to understand how work and family related factors influence the work–family balance of Indian women IT professionals. The study is based on an exploratory qualitative study of 13 women IT professionals in the software sector in Bangalore, India. The narratives reveal six major themes: familial influences on life choices; multi-role responsibilities and attempts to negotiate them; self and professional identity; work–life challenges and coping strategies; organisational policies and practices; and social support.

Introduction

Work and family are the two most important domains in a person's life and their interface has been the object of study for researchers world-wide. There is a felt need to balance and integrate family needs and career requirements (Sturges & Guest, 2004) and research in the field of work–family interface has increased dramatically in the past two decades (Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997). The changing social structures arising out of dual career couples, single parent families, an increasing number of parents with dependent care responsibilities for children, and ageing parents have all contributed to increasing research in the area of work–life balance. There is a glaring under representation of samples from developing economies in the research literature on work and family. Increased globalisation coupled with the recognition that balancing work and family is a challenge for employed parents in almost all modern societies, suggests that a chapter of this research should be conducted in different cultural contexts (Ayree, Srinivas, & Tan, 2005).

In a transitioning society like India, where the traditional roles of women as homemakers and caretakers are deeply entrenched, the work–family balance becomes a challenge for women and their employers. Over the last decade, Indian society has witnessed a surge in the participation of women in the workforce, especially in the software

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industry. The growing number of women in the Indian IT workforce has led to an increasing interest from academia and practitioners in the topic of work–life balance, specifically of working women in the IT industry. In the light of the increasing number of women in the IT industry, there is a need to examine the phenomenon of the work–life balance of Indian women IT professionals in greater depth.

The main research question of this study is: How do work and family related factors influence the work–family balance of Indian women IT professionals?

What challenges do they face and what coping strategies do they use to achieve work–family balance?

The paper is structured in three parts. The first part looks at the literature on work–life balance and the phenomenon of Indian women professionals in the IT industry. The second part explores the life histories, work–life issues, and choices of 13 women captured through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The final part discusses the emerging themes from the narratives in the light of the literature on work–family balance and draws conclusions on how working women software professionals in India manage their lives.

Women professionals and the work–family balance: literature review

The work–family balance has been conceptualised as an individual's orientation across different life roles, an inter-role phenomenon (Marks & MacDermid, 1996), 'satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home with a minimum of role conflict' (Campbell-Clark, 2000, p 349), and 'a satisfying, healthy and productive life that includes work, play and love, that integrates a range of life activities with attention to self and to personal and spiritual development, and that expresses a person's unique wishes, interests, and values' (Kofodimos, 1984, p.xiii; Shaffer, Francesco, Joplin & Lau, 2003). Traditionally, research on the work–family interface has been dominated by a conflict perspective focusing on negative effects such as stress (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1999; Haas, 1999).

To correct the bias of the dominating focus on the negative outcomes of the work–family interface, a growing body of research is focusing on how work and family can benefit each other (Lauring & Selmer, 2010). Among the several proposed theoretical concepts include positive spillover (Demerouti, Geurts, & Kompier, 2004), enhancement and enrichment (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006), and facilitation (Wayne, Grzywacz, Carlson, & Kacmar, 2007). The facilitation takes place when the gains obtained in one domain are transferred to and enhance the functioning in the other domain. One way a person can be facilitated in the work domain is by support in the home and work domains.

The role of social support has consistently emerged in literature as an important factor that influences work–family balance in a positive manner. Social support outside of work labelled by Marcinkus, Whelan-Berry, and Gordon (2007) as personal social support may come from an employee's spouse or partner, parents, siblings, children, extended family, and friends. Numerous studies have demonstrated that personal social support is positively associated with the work–family balance. Of particular importance is support from the husband who contributes in a variety of areas including earnings and personal financial management (Kate, 1998), home and family responsibilities (Baron, 1987), career management and support (Gordon & Whelan-Berry, 2004; Hertz, 1999), and interpersonal support (Becker & Moen, 1999). Family support also includes the exchange of support among relatives (Voydanoff, 2002).

The personal social support can be further conceptualised as emotional and instrumental support (Wayne, Randel, & Stevens, 2006). Instrumental support refers to behaviours and attitudes of family members aimed at assisting day-to-day household activities, such as relieving the employee of household tasks or otherwise accommodating the employee's work requirements (King, 1997). This allows the family member to focus his/her time and preserve energy for work when it might otherwise be scarce; suggesting that it positively influences the individual's functioning at work. Emotional support refers to the expression of feelings to enhance others' affect or behaviour (Erickson, 1993). Emotional support contributes to positive affect that helps the individual in the work domain (Wayne et al., 2006).

The role of workplace support, i.e., the support received from supervisors and co-workers (Voydanoff, 2002)] is another critical element of work–family balance. Ezra and Deckman (1996) found that organisational and supervisor understanding of family duties are positively related to satisfaction with the balance between work and family life. Workplace support via an organisational approach involves the implementation of family friendly policies, which are associated with satisfaction with the work–family balance (Ezra & Deckman, 1996). Organisations offer a wide range of work–family benefits and programmes to their employees, such as job sharing, telecommuting, job protected parental leave, part-time return to work options, flexitime, resource and referral services, unpaid family leave, dependent care assistance, shorter standard work weeks, improvement in job conditions, on-site childcare, support groups for working parents, sports facilities, day-care facilities, laundry facilities, and canteen facilities (Lobel & Kossek, 1996; Rajadhyaksha & Smita, 2004). Research shows that flexible work arrangements allow individuals to integrate work and family responsibilities in time and space and are instrumental in achieving a healthy work and family balance (Bond, Galinsky, Lord, Staines, Brown, 1998; Galinsky, Bond, & Friedman, 1993).

While much of the literature review presented above could be gender neutral, literature recognises that all of the above mentioned variables have a greater impact on women at work. Webster (2002) points out that family structures and female roles vary across countries, but overall, women continue to be the primary provider for domestic and childcare responsibilities. The presence of large numbers of women in the workforce and their drive for careers has resulted in increasing attention to work–family balance issues. Literature on female software workers clearly demonstrates that women experience a sense of empowerment from their work (Fuller & Narasimhan, 2007). Software professionals are known to derive their identity from their occupation (Deetz, 1995). Many women value their careers and their development as central concepts of their identity (King, 1997; Shaffer, Francesco, Joplin, & Lau, 2003). However, evidence from the US and the UK does not appear promising. In a survey on

information systems (IS), demographics, salaries and job satisfaction reveal that the 'glass ceiling' keeps women in midlevel jobs in the IS department (Brett & Stroh, 1999). The survey confirmed the existence of a salary gap by gender. The authors suggested that the reasons for the salary gap might be both structural and social in nature. The reasons presented include the observation that women did not enter the IS field in large numbers until the early 1980s. Another reason is that some women may pass up the chance to take higher paying jobs because they choose not to relocate. The gender differences in IT careers appear to be affecting the competitiveness of countries globally.

As Ahuja (2002) sums up, the statistics do not bear out the initial optimism shown regarding women's participation in the field of IT. Since IT is a relatively young field, it had initially been assumed that impediments to the advancement of women long existent in other fields, such as an established 'old boys' network', a large pool of more qualified and experienced male professionals, the lack of female role models and mentors, and established discriminatory practices, would not present the same barriers to women (Berney & Jones, 1988). Given this background, the context for our present study becomes very relevant.

Research on the work—family balance in women in other sectors has recognised that in comparison to occupation roles, the salience of women's commitment to family roles—so often emphasised in Indian culture as being central to their very being— remains undiminished (Bhatnagar & Rajadhyaksha, 2001). Additionally, the authors emphasise that, in contrast to women in Western societies, many Indian women, especially those in traditional joint and extended families, are obligated to care for elderly relatives.

In a study done by Kapoor, Bhardwaj, and Pestonjee (1999), married women employees reported that they face difficulties in maintaining a balance between work and family and their careers suffer because of family responsibility. A reason for this difficulty is likely to be the lack of help from their husbands. A survey conducted by Rajadhyaksha and Smita (2004) indicated that only 34% of husbands extended help willingly to their wives. Twenty-two per cent of husbands sometimes helped out but a large proportion still subscribed to the traditional role and did not extend help to their wives. Parikh (1998) found that motherhood makes balancing difficult, because women have to manage the external interfaces of work and career, management of home and children. A survey on parenthood among 2700 Indian couples found that the ideal scenario, according to 60% of working mothers polled, is a part-time job. Only 19% of them feel full-time motherhood is a viable option. The men, not surprisingly, feel that an at-home mom is the best solution (Banerjee & Dutta- Sachdeva, 2008). Workplace support in India seems conditional though. In a study conducted by Parikh (1998), women experienced support from supervisors, but this mainly occurred when a woman had proved to be capable and competent and had earned respect at the workplace.

In a society where a large number of women who are entering the workforce in the IT industry are first generation women professionals, it would appear that the perceptions of work and family balance may reflect some unique elements hitherto not addressed in the literature. The nature of the software services industry in India, which is a unique global delivery model, also poses some unique challenges for professionals in general and women professionals in particular.

Nature of the software services sector and its impact on the work—life balance: a study

One of the significant changes witnessed in the labour markets in India in the last decade has been the entry of women professionals. The percentages of females in regular employment in urban India, increased from 25.8% in 1983 to 33.3% in 2000 and the labour force participation rates is projected to reach 361 per 1000 females in the year 2026 (McNay, Unni, & Cassen, 2004). In the organised sector, women workers constituted 18.4% as on March 31, 2003, of which about 49.68 lakh (4.96 million) women were employed in the public and private sectors (The Financial Express, 2006). In fact, the largest numbers of women employees are in the IT/ITES sector (Wakhlu, 2008). The 'phenomenon of Indian Women IT professionals' is the term used to describe the enormous rise of women in the IT/BPO industry (The Indian programmer, 2000). Women accounted for 26.4% of the total India-based workforce in the IT industry in 2007, up from 24% in 2005 and women comprise 25% of the employee strength of the major Indian IT companies (Ali, 2006). Women's participation in the IT workforce is seen as a critical enabling factor for the continued growth of the industry (The Economic Times, 2009).

The characteristics of the software services industry in India and the nature of the work pose some unique challenges for professionals in the industry. The challenges are aggravated in the case of women professionals. The software industry in India is characterised by a project-oriented organisation and as the industry has matured, more complex and strategic projects have been outsourced to India (Ethiraj, Kale, Krishnan, & Singh, 2005). Software professionals are faced with an environment of uncertainty and instability with consequent pressures to work longer hours (Scholarios & Marks, 2004). This pressure is a result of two factors. First, the time differences with the West, US and Europe, necessitate employees to work at night in India. Furthermore, the concept of a 24-h knowledge factory —the evolution of 24-7-365 help desk support— requires software engineers to conduct team meetings and virtual work sessions, where team members need to adopt temporal flexibility, a more fluid approach to time—whether holding conference calls outside the traditional 8 to 6 workday or fast-tracking a software project in shifts (Teagarden, Meyer & Jones, 2008). Second is the project-based work with unpredictable workloads and the requirement to deliver projects consistently within the stipulated time and without critical bugs (Mathew, 2007), often involving extensive travel. The project orientation of the industry with rapid technology changes that make skills quickly obsolete requires software professionals to frequently re-skill. Consequently, software professionals need to put in extra training and educational hours to keep up with these changes (Armstrong, Riemenschneider, Allen & Reid, 2007).

Women who aspire to play a bigger role in technology need to maintain a consistently high learning curve. With the constant innovation happening in this arena, it is not enough

to be a good worker in the IT industry; one must keep updating technological skills. No other industry sees such significant changes in technology from time to time (Ali, 2006). The time required for professional development will have to come out of the personal time of the employees. Long working hours, unpredictable workloads and the constant pressure of updating skills all have a strong impact on the work—family balance of software professionals.

However, it must be recognised that in Indian society, where a woman's role in relation to herself, her family and society is being redefined, the new and expanded role of women with a strong occupational identity is putting a lot of pressure on women's time and energy. Indeed, balance was one of the commonly cited challenges of IT work in a study on women in IT (Adya, 2008).

In summary, it can be concluded that well educated, highly skilled women software professionals in India have entered a rapidly growing and very demanding sector in which they want to pursue careers. The nature of the industry and the fact that women software professionals are in the crucial phase in their lives, 23—38 years, where women are drawn into marriage and motherhood, puts increasing pressure on maintaining a work—life balance (Perrons, 2003; Rajalakshmi, 2003).

It is evident that the nature of the sector and the changing aspirations and roles of women in Indian society create challenges for their work—family balance, which this study puts under further scrutiny. The present study was designed to explore, document and analyse the factors that influence the work—family balance of women software professionals in India and also to understand the support they receive both in their personal and professional lives.

Methodology

Since, to the best of our knowledge, there are no other studies in the context of the Indian software industry, which attempt to capture the unique dimensions of women's participation in work and their experiences in managing life and work, we felt that an exploratory study such as ours was needed. A semi-structured interview protocol was used, which covered the following topics: educational, work- and family background, career development, expectations at work and experiences of success and failure, definition of their roles at home, the relationships with the family, the organisational and personal support received, and aspirations and dreams. Women were encouraged to illustrate the manner in which they arrived at decisions or the manner in which they coped with conflicts and challenges through specific examples. Women described their decisions to embark on their careers, the life changes they experienced and the decision that they had to make along their career journey. They also shared their dreams and their aspirations about where they saw themselves in the future.

They were frequently asked additional follow-up questions to clarify their feelings and their points of view towards the issues addressed. The clarifications for conflicting or unclear answers were sought either during the interviews or afterwards via informal email exchanges and telephone conversations. Extensive handwritten notes were taken, which were transcribed at the earliest possible time after the interviews.

Judgment sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to locate information-rich key respondents and care was taken to ensure that the sample represented women with varying marital status and parental status. Women were identified for interviews through the professional and personal network of the second author and their participation was voluntary. The sample included 13 women who were drawn from various life stages from the software industry. Eight of the women worked for multinational corporations and the remaining worked with Indian companies. All the women in the sample were engineers with an average experience of eight years. Three women were married with two children, four women with one child, two married with no children, three were single women, and one woman was engaged to be married. Nine of the respondents were managers and had about seven to nine people reporting to them. The remaining were technical or domain experts. Three of the respondents had children who were in middle school while the others had children in primary school.

Appendix 1 provides an overview of the women's demographic profile. Despite the fact that divorces and single motherhood are gradually emerging trends in urban Indian society, the mothers in our sample represent the majority of Indian women who have children after marriage and who are still married.

Since this was an exploratory study, the researchers used inductive analysis to identify categories, themes, and patterns that emerge from the data (Janesick, 1994). To draw meaning from the data, a range of tactics was used, such as comparison/contrast, noting of patterns and themes, clustering, use of metaphors, confirmatory tactics, following up surprises, and checking results with respondents (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The coding procedures of Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) were followed which resulted in identification of themes from the narratives that are presented in the section on findings.

Findings of the exploratory study

Six broad themes emerged from the analysisof the interviews which are relevant to the understanding of work-family balance of women IT professionals in India: familial influences on life choices; multi-role responsibilities and attempts to negotiate them; self-identity; work—life challenges and coping strategies; organisational policies and practices; and social support. Table 1 illustrates the themes, categories and dimensions that emerged from these interviews; each of the themes is elaborated upon.

Familial influence on life choices

The familial influence appeared as a significant factor in life choices on work and family for all women. Familial influence refers to the extent to which the immediate family plays a role in creating the values and meaning around work and life for the women. The impact of familial influence ranged from setting goals for an engineering education from childhood, making decisions related to admission in engineering colleges, or relocating from a village to a city to get access to better education, or fulfilling dreams of a mother who herself

Table 1 Themes, categories and dimensions concerning work—family balance of women IT professionals in India.

Theme	Category	Dimension
Familial influences on life choices	Role models Life decisions	Father and brother Education Career Marriage Children
Multi-role responsibilities and negotiating them	Role conflict	Taking care of the children Taking care of dependent parents or parents-in-law Being a homemaker
Self-identity	Work-identity Family identity	Hierarchy of role identities
Work—life challenges and coping strategies	Nature of the IT industry Prioritising commitments Personal self-management	Working hours Tight deadlines Setting priorities in work and family Pursuing life interests
Organisational policies and practices	Work—family programmes Women friendliness	Flexible working hours Child-care facilities Working from home
Social support	Family/spouse support Domestic help Supervisor/co-worker support	Instrumental Emotional

could not aspire to become a professional during her youth. As one respondent said:

> 'My father was in the army and he would be posted all over the country. My mother became a home maker after marriage and always felt "you could not be anybody when your husband has a transferable job". Since my dad fought two wars, my mother emphasised the importance of financial independence for all of us (two daughters).'

All the women had very strong male role models, brothers, fathers or uncles, who were engineers/technical professionals. They encouraged the women to aspire for a career in engineering. The narratives revealed that the women's career role models were predominantly males. An explanation for the absence of women as role models is that women acquiring technical qualifications in large numbers are a recent phenomenon. Many of the women in our sample are first generation women entering the labour workforce in professional jobs.

Role responsibilities and fulfilment

What emerged from the conversations with the women respondents is the aggravation and accentuation of the role conflict in the context of the software services industry. There were two aspects to the role conflict: the traditional element of time balance—equal time devoted to work and family (Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 2002), and the role of dependent care which is specific to the Indian context. Many respondents have parents or parents-in-law who depend on them for care. Family members reside with them either on a permanent or temporary basis. These women live in so-called joint families. 'Joint family' refers to a social unit with two or three generations of paternally related males and their dependents who share a common residence, eating facilities, and more important, property.

Although the women had high career ambitions they also felt a high responsibility towards the family members. The sick, the aged, the infirm and the destitute all depend on their immediate families and relatives to care for them (Roy, 2003). Women were fulfilling these roles which sometimes added strain, but also provided them with a feeling of contentment in fulfilling their duties. In line with Roy (2003) a strong sense of family obligation in extended families was expressed in the stories of the women as they felt that family was more important than a career. This also helped them in achieving balance in life. Both the respondents mentioned below are women pursuing careers actively but their view on the role of the family exemplifies the spirit

> 'Family will always come first at any point of time. Organisations can go on without you, a family is dependent. When trying to do both you will not have success, you are not satisfying both.' (Lk, career and family woman)

> 'If the need arises then family comes first. There is hardly an option.' (Sa, career and family woman)

Giddens (1997) points out that kinship relations helped determine, and in many cases, completely defined, key decisions affecting the course of events for the individual over the whole lifespan: decisions about when and whom to marry, where to live, how many children to have and how to care for one's children. Despite being under family and

even societal influences, most of the women made their own decisions on how to live their lives. For example, while most of the married women lived with their parents-in- law who could have a strong influence on the decision-making process in life, the narratives clarified that the women and their husbands decided child planning and childcare, not permitting the grandparents to interfere.

Self-identity

Self-identity or self concept (Hall, 2002) derived from work was momentous throughout the stories of the women IT professionals. The women placed the work role high in the hierarchy of role identities. It became apparent from the interviews that women saw their work and careers as a prime element in their self-identity-building. Women described feelings of challenge, accomplishment, morale boost, satisfaction of using skills, drive to explore, drive for self-development, growth as a person, and personal satisfaction derived from work to define their identity.

The following statements support place of work in the role-identity hierarchy:

> 'I am a work-centered person.' 'My identity is at work.' (Sa)

> 'Work gives you a lot of independence in your thoughts and in the way you handle things and look at things.' (Sr)

> 'I have learnt to be tactful, to be assertive, and to find a way to approach problems by the day-to-day situations. Sitting at home would not have exposed me to this. Having worked teaches you to cope with frustration, to solve problems.' (Ta)

Support was found for Castells's (1997) statement that work outside the home opened women's worlds, and broadened their social networks and their experience. This indicates that the hierarchy of role identities can change throughout the course of life. Ibarra (2004, p. 16) states that 'identities change in practice, as we start doing new things (crafting experiments), interacting with different people (shifting connections), and reinterpreting our life stories through the lens of the emerging possibilities (making sense).' For some women IT professionals their identities changed in practice as they started playing new roles such as students with the aim of climbing the corporate ladder, focusing more on the home maker-role by taking up a part-time job, or engaging in community service.

Work—life balance challenges and strategies

The nature of the IT industry emerged as a general category within the theme of the work—family balance challenges, with the majority of women emphasising that the projects with tight deadlines, extensive travelling and long and/or oddworking hours, affected the work—family balance. This is consistent with the findings from Teagarden et al.'s (2008) study that identified holding conference calls outside the traditional 8—6 workday or fast-tracking a software project in shifts. Some excerpts:

> 'In the past there were incidences where I would work until I got the release out. This meant working until the next day without any sleep or working on weekends. I developed Repetitive Strain Injuries, had severe pain and I suffered quite a bit.' (Ra)

> 'In my spare time I like to watch TV or a movie, but I cannot do that for too long, because my eyes start hurting after having looked at a computer system all day. It is sometimes hard to cope when at 10.00 pm I have to log in for 1 to 1 ½ hours for meetings with US people. This leaves me with less spare time during the week. It is the disadvantage of this job but in most IT firms you would have to put in these working hours.' (Lk)

> 'My job required travelling. This made life very hectic and had its impact on the work—family balance: I started dumping household stuff on my husband and was not taking care of my share of work.' (Js)

Additional working hours were at the expense of home time, while high work intensity or work pressure may result in fatigue, anxiety or other adverse psycho-physiological consequences that can affect the quality of home and family life (White, Hill, McGovern, Mills, & Smeaton, 2003). The narratives from the women clearly support this finding.

Women also had their strategies to cope with the challenges to achieve the work—family balance. This evolved primarily around prioritising commitments and personal self-management. One of the coping mechanisms used by the women IT professionals was to prioritise commitments within the work and family domains, in the short term and the long term. The statement below shows how a woman prioritised her career interests at work:

> 'The most important thing is prioritising. On a day-to-day basis but also on the longer term. The key issue is how much time you are willing to spend. Capacity itself is limitation. Some people have more stamina, are more driven. You have to have an idea of how much you are capable of doing.'(Sh))

Other women clearly prioritised their families over work and accepted that they would have to put their career aspirations on hold. These strategies enabled the women to achieve their desired work—family balance. The statements below show how and why women prioritised family over work.

> 'We consciously make a decision as to what has priority. If I was very ambitious and wanted to be the best within a company then I would not have chosen this path, I would have taken a different route. I feel that I am not bogged down with work. I am able to control things at work. Now I just do the job-well and the rest is family time. I feel it is important to stay at home. My take on it is that you can feel the difference in the kid. My presence at home had a good impact on the family. This resulted in satisfaction of staying at home.' (Mj)

> 'My daughter fell sick so I decided that I did not want to work and I took a break. My husband was surprised, because I had always worked. He asked me: "Are you sure you want to do this?" My friends and relatives said: "Is she nuts!" For me it was clear that my daughter was top priority. It was a conscious decision, it was not forced'. (Js)

> 'Now my career phase is a plain thing, a plateau. This is out of convenience, but I would like to go back to what I was earlier. At this time a peak job would have been difficult. The balance has worked out fine. An IT job is

not 9 to 5, but now I can work these hours. This is not helping my career aspirations, but that is my choice.'(Sa)

It is interesting to note that these three women respondents hold flexible work hours in their respective organisations. However, the interviews also raised important questions about their definitions of success both at work and at home.

An emerging category was personal self-management, which appeared to be a strategy to achieve the work—family balance. To achieve the work—family balance requires what Ibarra (2004, p. 15) calls 'reinvention': reconsidering not only the kind of work one wants to do but also the kind of person one wants to be and the sacrifices one is prepared to make to grow into that new self. The process of reinvention to achieve balance is captured by one interviewee:

'I would like to pursue hobbies and contribute to the industry apart from work alone. I would like to write papers, submit articles and spend time on writing poetry. I may not want to be in the technical field all my life. I want clarity, self-awareness, to develop interests and use my strengths. It will evolve. I am in the process of articulating a vision. I want to find out what my calling in life is, develop a personal vision and then see how to align that to my personal context.' (Ra)

Another interviewee had gone through the process of reinvention, which enabled her to achieve her desired balance: At her former company, she had achieved the 'top ranked performer' status but she chose to leave. Her main drive to change jobs was to be able to do different things. She had always wanted to do something beyond management, contribute to a social cause. Her job allowed her to do this to a certain extent and beyond that she aspires to start a small social organisation with her husband that aims at literacy. This will give her great personal satisfaction. This case supported the suggestion of Marks, Huston, Johnson, and MacDermid (2001) that for a woman, feeling more balance may mean adding more of certain activities that she already does, or adding things that she is not yet doing to counterbalance the other things she does. Interestingly, personal self-management was also a challenge, particularly for single women. They appeared to be more challenged to achieve the work—family balance. This is outlined by a single woman from our sample:

'I am single and this just so happened. It is a conscious choice not to be married, but I do not rule out getting married in the future. My single status is not due to inability to make commitments. The choice for a partner would be based on his support for my career. Personal attention would focus on having a family at some point in life. I would see myself as a mother. I spend more time at work than I would like to, but I keep it restricted to the workplace. I am not able to pursue other interests. This leads to a lack of balance. My life is not well-balanced.' (Sh)

This woman has become what Ibarra (2004, p. 86) calls 'overcommitted to work, losing other sources of perspective in life'. Correcting the encroachment of work on personal life is a pressing concern for most professionals seeking change, whether or not they are conscious of it at the start. Even though this woman IT professional was conscious of the encroachment of work on her personal life, it remained a major challenge to achieve balance in life.

Organisation policies and practices

Women reported the existence of work—family friendly policies and programmes that facilitated work—family balance: flexitime; work from home policy; leave of absence policy; one month leave a year; maternity leave; childcare facilities and sabbatical. Work—family facilitation is highlighted in the following statement:

'Previously the work was done without Internet connectivity. Now, the company has given a cable modem, which means I can do office work at home. I can leave the office at 6pm, make dinner at home and then attend meetings later in the evening. In this way the company contributed to improving my work—family balance.' (Rs)

These work—family friendly policies enabled women to attend to dependent care responsibilities, household activities or to pursue higher studies. Policies and programmes that are specifically aimed at enabling women to combine work and personal lives are also labelled as work—family friendly policies.

Despite the existence of work—family women-friendly policies some of the women were sceptical about the keenness and willingness of organisations to incorporate these policies and programmes, as expressed by one of the women:

'There is an attitude towards women-friendly policies in India. This is a perception thing, just to show that the company facilitates women's needs.' (Ma)

Many of these policies appear to be enabling for working mothers. as one respondent mentioned

'Being single means that managers expect you to come to work and they take you for granted. You have to do night shifts, travel extensively. When being single you do not have a family, and people are not aware of what is personal. Can there be a personal life without a family?' (An)

Even though the existence of work—family friendly policies can facilitate the work—family balance, these policies do not necessarily facilitate it sufficiently for the type of work, the type of position, or home responsibilities that Indian women have. For example, existing flexible working hour policies weren't of benefit to all women:

'You stay in the office or work from home. Therefore there are flexi-hours; these are helpful when you are 'an individual contributor'. But when you are a manager, there are discussions, team meetings where (your) presence is required, then it becomes difficult.' (Lk)

Roy (2003) notes those flexible working hours are a great advantage for married women, particularly women with smaller children, but it is difficult for women with a rigorous rhythm of work. This applies particularly to women project

managers in the IT industry (Heeks, Krishna, Nicholson, & Sahay, 2000; International Labour Organization, 2001). Evidence for the rigorous rhythms of work in the IT industry and its affect on work—family balance is provided by one of the women:

> 'Taiwan to California, time zones become a key thing in managing the work, and it is important that we have good interactions with these people. Conference calls with the California people are in the night. There are a few hiccups when I have to take care of my kid or I have to ask my husband to take care of my kid. This causes a lot of stress in time management, it becomes a little difficult to manage; I have to decide which calls are really important.' (Sr)

Social support

This theme consisted of two categories namely spousal/family support and supervisor/co-worker support. Support from the husband is crucial in being able to balance work and family as our study found. The interviews revealed two distinct ways in which husbands give support: the first one is the moral support for the woman's career and study pursuits. Interestingly, the stories reveal that husbands do not only support their wives, they are eager for their wives to work. There is a favourable trend towards women in employment over the last decade. The second way to provide support is domestic and childcare support. Women IT professionals mentioned that their husbands took care of the children when they had to attend conference calls at home or when they reached home late from the office. Husbands also support their wives in the household chores. This confirms Roy's (2003) finding that home is becoming an area of participation for both partners, where women are actively involved in paid work.

A typical source of support in the Indian culture that is widely used is domestic help. In addition, women have domestic help from cleaners, cooks and maids that reduced their time spent on household tasks, which, in turn, facilitated the work—life balance. Women had nannies for their children or help from their mothers-in-law who stay in their homes and take care of the children.

> 'I do not want to leave my children with strangers so I leave them with my family. Otherwise I would have been hesitant in leaving my child. My mother-in law stays at our house and takes care of my children. She moved in after my father-in law died so support from her is more or less taken for granted. In addition, I have a girl who takes care of my son. Because of this support system I do not feel guilty; otherwise it would be impossible. My husband is also supportive. The mornings are hectic. It will not happen if there is no coordination. Each one in the house ensures things are done. My parents who are in Bangalore add to moral support and have always been supportive.' (Pr)

Various interviewees pointed out the importance of supportive supervisors and colleagues in managing their work—family balance. When escalations occur and there are personal issues to attend to they would request peers in the office to address the problems. The role of peer support networks is seen as enabling in many ways. Women reported that their peers, both male and female, helped to reduce their work load related challenges. This in turn contributed positively to the work—family balance.

Discussion

The initial question that guided our research was: How do work and family related factors influence the work—family balance of Indian women IT professionals and what are their challenges and coping strategies to achieve work—family balance? We sought to understand how work and family related elements influence the work—family balance of these women. Six themes emerged from the narratives: familial influences on life choices, role responsibilities and negotiation, self-identity, work—life challenges and coping strategies, organisational policies and practices, and social support.

In line with the findings from Fouad et al.'s (2008) study, the career and life choices of most of the women were influenced by the family, but women integrated parental direction with their personal choices. In India, women's wishes and desires are expected to conform to those of their family's traditions, honour, and welfare (Rana, Kagan, Lewis, & Rout, 1998) that create tension between the development of personal interests and family expectations, thus affecting the work—family balance of the women. Pocock (2003) rightly argues that with the current patterns of work and labour market participation and the stasis in the domestic relations and roles between men and women, work and family collide. Given the multiple roles that working women play, they usually do not get adequate time to participate in leisure and recreational activities and still carry the responsibility of housework (Roy, 2003). This was emphasised in all the interviews.

Married women acknowledged that they have less time and energy to spend on their husbands due to their multiple roles that require time and involvement. Women reported to have less time to spend with relatives due to their busy work schedules combined with the fact that, in some cases, relatives live far away. Lastly, five women reported less leisure time because they are currently enrolled in an MBA programme which takes a substantial amount of time and inhibits a desired work—life balance. De Marneffe (2004) found that decisions about motherhood created tension around a woman's point of identity and its relationship to other aspects of herself, such as her need for other aspirations, her need to work, and her need for solitude.

Women software professionals, already mothers or intending to become mothers, struggled with their identities and role priorities as they managed to shape their desired identities. In line with Perrons' (2003) study, the shaping of women's self-identity was a learning process throughout the 'crucial phase' in women's lives. There is a relationship between aspects of personal development, a person's life phase, fundamental motives and talents, her/his family and the environment in which s/he work (Schein, 1978). An individual's life choices are complicated by the career and life of his/her partner, and by children and/or elders who need care, time and attention at unpredictable times (Fletcher & Bailyn, 1996). The

relationships between the aforementioned aspects clearly became visible in the interviews which pose a high demand on women software professionals. Nevertheless, the women in our study experienced empowerment, challenges, satisfaction, and learning even while operating in this web of role responsibilities.

Prior research (Mainiero, 1994; Parikh, 2001; Lyness & Thompson, 1997) indicates that the ambition and involvement of working women cause them to make sacrifices and compromises in their personal lives as a consequence of their high-profile careers. This in turn impacts their work—family balance. The narratives confirm this. A number of women mentioned that they were not able to pursue personal interests due to the commitments of work and family that were imposed on them. However, they were willing to make sacrifices for the greater cause of achieving the work—family balance.

The present study supports the importance of spouse/family support for women IT professionals to achieve the work—family balance. Milkie and Peltola (1999) found that role of the husband is important in achieving balance. Quesenberry, Trauth, and Morgan (2006) also found that a prevalent theme in relation to the work—family balance is a supportive spouse. The narratives lent further support to the past findings; spouses provided instrumental and emotional support, families and domestic help were crucial in achieving the work—family balance. Yet the survey conducted by Rajadhyaksha and Smita (2004) indicated that only 34% of husbands extended help willingly to their wives. Twenty-two per cent of husbands sometimes helped out but a large proportion still subscribed to the traditional role and did not extend help to their wives. Therefore, more research is needed to understand whether the entrenched roles of women as home makers and care providers in homes are really changing.

Ali (2006) in a study on women in the IT industry, found that for women social support from the family and the organisation is crucial in combining multiple roles. While their husbands were away on business trips the women in that study were solely responsible for the household and child rearing and they reported having difficulty finding a reliable maid, they had to cope with young children and manage their careers since there were no crèches available. Often these women travelled frequently and had to deal with the challenges of balancing a career with motherhood. They reported that the pressure of rearing a small child, especially when one travels for long durations can be tough in the absence of a support system.

The findings of our study point to the uniqueness of the position of women software professionals in India Firstly, women continue to be the primary providers for domestic and childcare responsibilities. Even among dual-earner career couples women spend more time on both housework and childcare than their partners, and many feel pushed into a home making role (Adema & Whiteford, 2007). Fulfilling this role can be complicated if domestic help is hard to find and the organisation does not provide childcare facilities. This is in contrast to women in the West, especially in Europe, where organisations offer a wide range of work—family benefits and programmes such as job protected parental leave (for both fathers and mothers), part-time return to work options, flexitime, unpaid family leave, dependent care assistance, on-site childcare, day-care facilities, which enable women to combine work and family more easily (Rajadhyaksha & Smita, 2004; Straub, 2007).

Secondly, the nature of the IT industry causes some unique challenges such as project work with peak load, working at odd hours and extensive travel that makes the work—life balance difficult to manage for women software professionals as opposed to other industries where one would not find such demanding features of work. Overall, our findings point to the fact that the multiple roles of women software professionals in India, the nature of the IT industry, and the socioeconomic context of India pose unique challenges for achieving the work—family balance. Nevertheless, the majority of women in our study were able to 'have it all' because of family support, similar to the findings of Vinnicombe and Bank (2003).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis highlighted the pervasive factors that impact the work—family balance. The societal role expectations, women's career ambitions, and the nature of the IT industry challenges the way they manage their professional and personal lives. While their self-identities primarily lie in their work, they are strongly influenced to perform the roles of homemaker and dependent care provider given the societal expectations; this does require negotiation both at home and at work in terms of how and when work can be done. Furthermore, women who had taken a slow track in their career growth, mentioned that this was a conscious choice as they felt their families needed them more at that point in time. An implication is that organisations may not be effectively utilising their talent; however implementing HR policies and practices would facilitate women in pursuing their career goals and dependent care responsibilities. With an increasing number of women entering the workforce and the Indian IT industry facing a talent shortage, it appears that understanding the role of work and family in the lives of women professionals will become an important HR concern.

Indian women IT professionals can achieve the work—family balance by setting priorities in their work and personal lives and by having support systems both at work, formally through HR policies and programmes, and informally through supervisor and co-worker support and at home. The data raised issues that need to be addressed both from an academic and practice point of view. The identified dimensions could serve as a platform for further research on women IT professionals and the work—life balance which will serve as a guide for organisations to address the work—family balance issues of working women by designing and implementing HR policies and practices for facilitating the work—family balance. This, in turn, would go a long way in enabling women to perform better at work, be more committed to the organisation, and ultimately contribute to the growth of the economy and positively impact society as whole.

Appendix

Demographic data of interviewees.

Name	Age group	Job designation	Years of exp	Employer	Educational degree	Marital/parental status
Sr	26—30	Project manager	6	IT company	B.E. Computer Science	Married, 1 daughter
Sh	31—35	Senior Project Manager	11	IT company	Masters in Computer Application (M.C.A)	Single
Ra	26—30	Project Manager	7	IT company	B.E. MBA	Single
An	26—30	Senior Software Engineer	4	Telecommunications company	B.E Computer Science	Single
Ta	31—35	Project Manager	9	IT company	M.S. Electronics and Communications	Married, 1 son
Mj (Privately owned)	36—40 B.E. Instrumentation	Project leader Married, 2 daughters	8	IT company		
Mh	26—30	Applications engineer	4	IT company	B.E. Mechanical	Married
Rs	20—25	Software developer	3	IT company	B.E. Electronics & Electrical	Engaged to be married
Lk	36—40	Project manager	16	IT company	B.E. Electronic & Communications	Married
Js	36—40	Senior project manager	15	IT company	B.E Instrumentation	Married, 2 daughters
Pr	31—35	Senior project manager	11	IT company	Masters of Computer Applications (MCA)	Married, 1 daughter, 1 son
Sa	31—35	Project manager	9	IT company (hardware)	B.E. Civil Engineering.	Married, 1 daughter
Um	31—35	Drop out	8	n.a.	B.E Computer Science	Married, 1 daughter

Note: All women work full-time except for Mj who works part-time and Um who has dropped out of the workforce.

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